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BETWEEN MATERIAL AND CULTURE; RECIPROCATING AN ACTIVE GAZE TOWARDS HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In today's urban environments, sited in network, the notion of place, as described by Marc Augé [1] and Michel de Certeau [2] has a reduced capacity to designate 'fixedness' or instigate the notion of an absolute emplacement. When we look at a site, a location or a place, we often aim to define its intrinsic character through relations of proximity connecting a network of information, such as climate, program, history and socio-political organizational strata, in order to understand and generate contextual relevance for the spaces/objects we design. Place in itself is thus inevitably relational to its surrounding. Yet in these current environments of 'connective-ness', where a multitude of indigenous elements start to overlap and intersect, relational proximity start to show signs of an absolute vastness. This seems to suggest a repositioning of the places we live in and the way we assume emplacement as architects or indeed, urban editors. As the contextual entanglement is more and more subject to the notion of 'super connections', places in the way they connect to a context, instigate simultaneous qualities of distant and near, dislodged and integrated, connected and disconnected nurturing a holistic 'field' of connected 'localities' as a dessert plateau cracked under radiating solar heat.

The acknowledgement of various doctrines, guiding this practice of 'editing urbanism' is of great importance for us to consider various concepts on authenticity guiding the simultaneous process of conserving and editing places within the city.

Up to this day, the preservation doctrine established through the Venice Charter [3], still defines renovation practice as part of a 'positivist truth-based method'. This objective approach to renovation implies somehow the substantiation of a material fetish aiming to consolidate historical sites as valuable material objects ideally 'frozen' in a distant

past; thus designating it to a particular timeframe. This notion of looking at historical sites as pure material form, isolated in time, does allow for certain blindness towards significant socio-cultural information, implicit to any location still active in the present. With the Burra Charter, issued in 1979 [4], we see a shift towards the incorporation of a more relative or contextual notion of truth in the way the status of a historical site is defined. By looking at historical sites inclusive current socio-cultural information surrounding the site, the understanding of its authenticity is not developed through a singular historical timeframe but through understanding history as a simultaneous 'drift' of important information uninterruptedly connecting past with present.

The Nara Documents, issued in 1994 [5] build on these ideas of cultural relativism and express a strong desire to oppose the notion of authenticity as a 'fixed concept' and instead propose a more evaluative attitude; taking into account the context of individual cultures particular to the site. As such, we observe two contrasting concepts; defining or searching for authenticity through the reconciliation of a material past on the one hand and defining authenticity through a 'relative attitude towards history' [6] on the other.

As a practice, we position ourselves critically against these concepts of absolute and relative authenticity with the aim to look at places as pluralists; including a mnemonic richness in the way we read historical sites.

Too often, in the narration of history, (i.e. exhibitions, theatre, film but also architectural renovation projects) history is portrayed through the notion of a false unity or 'pure historical timeframe' supporting the narration of history following a preset historical classification system; separating renaissance painting from baroque sculpture etc. In real life, objects and spaces from many periods, old and new, surround us simultaneously; any pursue in excluding the quality of such layered history seems to accommodate a sense of forgetting.

In this article, I seek to unpack the need to juxtapose new ideas and concepts against layers of information particular to historical sites. Through the commentary of a number of our projects this is explained as a process of inclusion, mainly through drawing, aiming to incorporate a multitude of contextual information particular to the site and across different timeframes. Important here is that spatial compositions, consequential of such juxtapositions, do hold qualities of 'strangeness' and stand explicitly different against their historic setting. This attitude, of closely engaging with a context yet nurturing distance in terms of aesthetic application finds its origin in a drawing method where the drawing and eventually the designed spaces gain an almost 'observational' status with a 'seeing' or 'observing' nature reciprocating an active gaze towards history, demonstrating a 'transparency' through time; urging the setup of a paradoxical spatial interchange of simultaneous qualities of 'distant and near'.

BETWEEN MATERIAL AND CULTURE

Nicolas Bourriaud proposes the term 'Altermodernism' announcing a new era following Postmodernism to describe aesthetic proposals critically engaging with an increasingly global context [7]. The world we experience today is entrenched by an infiltrating and ever extending communication apparatus, surpassing travel and physical migration giving birth to simultaneous attendance in this 'fractured dessert plateau' of multiple localities. Altermodernism, as described by Bourriaud, is deployed as an explorative platform in search of a 21st century modernism, very different from Postmodernism for example, which is setting us after or outside the historic period of modernism. As such Altermodernism does not exist in linear reference to a previous timeframe yet acknowledges history as a network of intersecting timelines where it becomes increasingly more difficult to think and thus design outside or after history yet much more appealing to sustain within its mesh of time.

As practitioners we identify with ideas acknowledging aspects of migration, notions of detachment and dispossession as implications of a transient society. In line with what Bourriaud unpacks through his argument on the end of postmodernism [8], we aim for a critical positioning, a 'relative attitude towards history' [6] by escaping a historical periphery, in order to re-enter a mesh of time in search for relevant points of intersection and overlap, particular to the site and the project at hand. The following two projects address the notion of place, in search for authenticity, as inevitably relational to their surrounding [1]. They address environments of 'connective-ness', where a multitude of indigenous elements start to overlap and intersect through the drawing of diagrams. The following two case studies describe projects set against the outer bastion wall of Valletta, a Unesco protected city and capital of Malta. The first case study describes a non-built project exemplifying the diagram as a collector and re-distributor of information to generate a 'site-explicit' proposal. The second case study describes a project-under-construction explained in direct relationship to its preceding diagram.

The drawings on the Valletta Coldstore (fig 1), invest in the notation of a step-by-step transformation of an initially defined spatial envelope taking on a maximum amount of built-up space as dictated by urban regulations. The new design for the Valletta Coldstore building accommodates a warehouse extension to the existing subterranean vaults, hidden in the Valletta Bastions, built by the Knights of Malta. Additional to the warehouse function the new design provides for new office spaces and a small retail outlet.

The site for this new building is a narrow ditch between a row of 18th century shop houses, facing the Valletta Harbour and the Valletta Bastions. To start the design process, a preliminary architectural stone volume is imagined, lodged in-between these two major limestone constructions, the very material the entire island is made of. This preliminary megalith is subjected to a series of subtraction to gradually generate its final outline. Local climatic conditions are used to slant facades, sheltering the west façade and tilt the east façade away from the flanking bastion wall to provide views of the sky above. A façade-segmentation is established by carving out wind-scoops/windows taking in northwest winds that are channelled through the ditch. To accommodate natural ventilation the sculpted megalith is lifted from the ditch floor to accommodate cold air intake from underneath the building. As more and more contextual parameters mould this architectural envelope the building is established as a naturally ventilated and shaded building, urging solidity to withstand the Mediterranean climate, very much

like its 18-century counterpart. Despite this high level of integration the building nests itself as a paradox in this stone landscape. Born out of site-specific considerations and grown in precise dialogue with its surrounding, it appears unfamiliar; a new giant striding this narrow corridor, taking on old concepts of stone construction, guarding structure/storeroom and climate regulation.

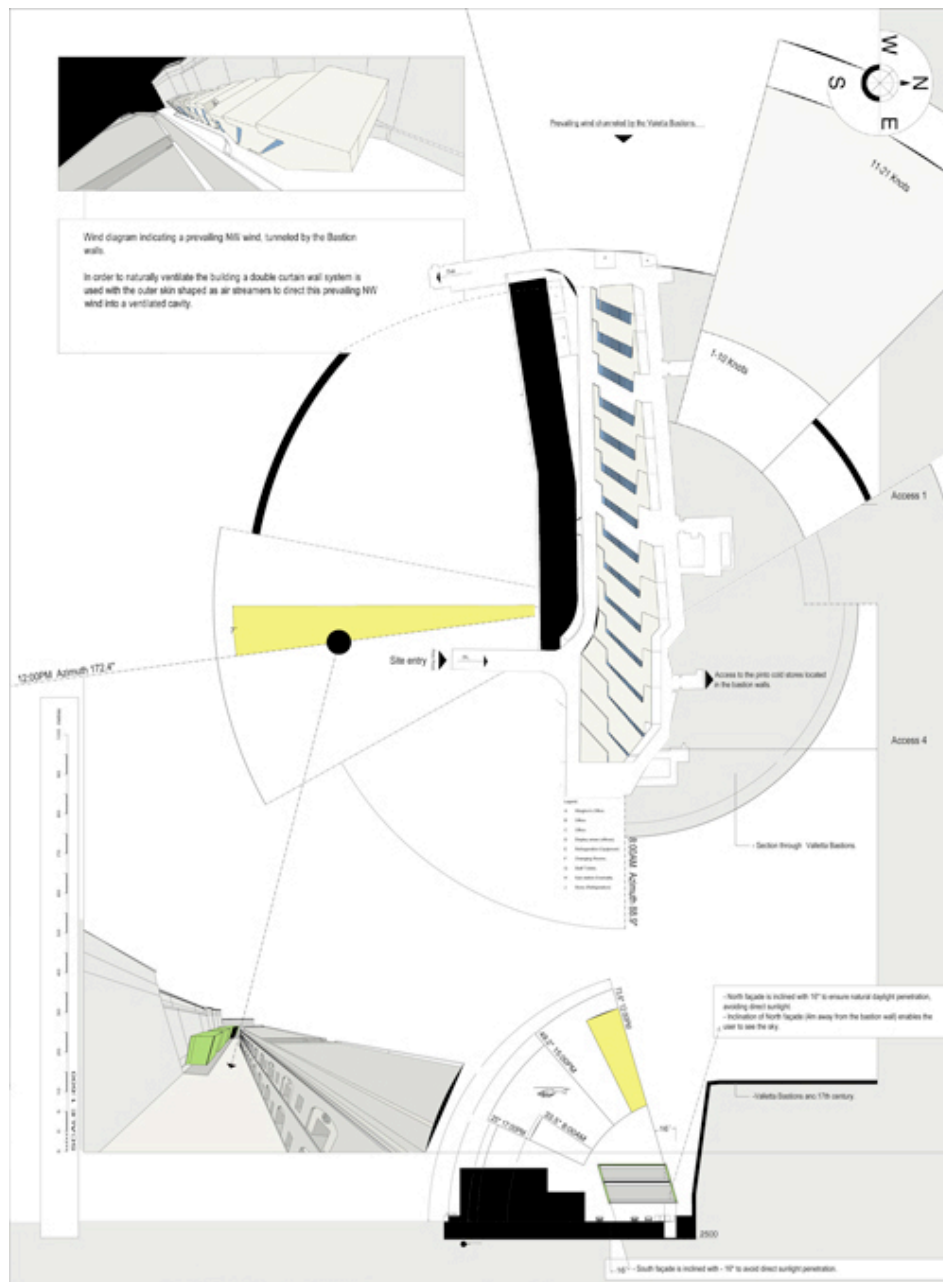


Fig 1. Cold Store Diagram listing first set of contextual parameters by Architecture Project

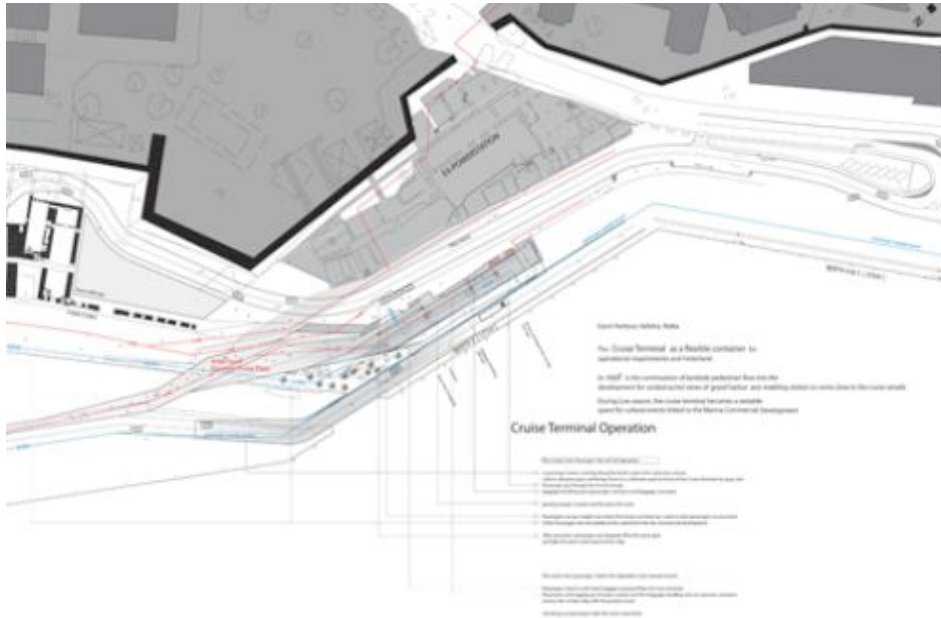


Fig 2. Partial plan of cruise passenger terminal site indicating multiple routes by Architecture Project

Drawings for the new Cruise Passenger Terminal (fig 2), set at the foot of the baroque Pinto Stores, guide the making-visible of ‘forgotten’ borders on site complementing the design of new boundaries as fresh sediments to the rich historic landscape of the Grand Harbour. The project currently underway for the construction of a sea passenger terminal (fig 3) aims at reinitiating a previous performance; that of entrance gate to the islands; an interchange of resources and ideas. Additional to the projects scope is the restoration and rehabilitation of the historic urban fabric, re-establishing the historical link between the harbour’s waters and Pinto Stores. To accommodate this linkage one of the ‘forgotten borders’ is re-established by cutting the original 18th century queue line out of a 20th century concrete platform extending in front of the Pinto Stores.

As an addition to this newly established border, the drawing of lines, indicating various flows of people in transit establishes the guiding principle for the design of new urban layers. This network of connections is translated into areas, and subsequently into volumes, sought by program. The speed by which people are assumed to move along these pathways is transferred onto the widths of the trace. Public pathways widen as they accommodate urban destination spaces, private pathways narrow to articulate transit. For example; public trajectories become narrow leading towards security checkpoints, thus slowing down visitors to accommodate security checks and one to one interaction with terminal staff. Pathways widen into boulevards or squares when more public interactive events need to take place along these public trajectories. The diagram orchestrates these implicit flows ensuring both public and private spaces are always continuous and strategically interlinked. In many ways a ‘previous’ hustle and bustle is re-established onto the old queue line yet taking into account contemporary programmatic requirements resulting in a weaving urban landscape of routes setting of for the city.



Fig 3. Views of the cruise passenger terminal showing the re-tracing of the 18th century queue line by Architecture Project.

The diagram, as a reflective instrument, is deployed in our design process as a conscious act to resist any notion of drawing as subordinate to the mental image. As much as the diagram is aimed at the 'organization' of a design process, it is thus used as a tool to derail thought and setting up lateral routes of reflection. As such, the diagram is negated as a scientific tool and looked at as a contemplative design tool, eroding any attempt to materialise preconceived imagery, as often present in the designers mind. This conscious act of 'avoidance' is induced to negate the possibility of a nostalgic liaison with the historical sites we design for. A nostalgia driven by the sites material representation, such as the 18th century Valetta bastion walls, adorned with years of erosion and deterioration. A nostalgia that when pursued hinders a critical attitude towards its current socio-cultural condition. As such any iconic linkage is avoided through this diagrammatic pursue, supporting the driving principle of dislocating form from its conventionally associated meaning or symbolic value, without denying the presence of such values (9). Our drawings are instruments of internal dialogue as described by Goldschmidt (10). They guide a process of discovery through a process of drawing and redrawing setting up a continual recording of boundaries as a graphical manipulation of a site or volume. These recordings, subject to site-specific parameters, set up a multifaceted interchange between diagram and context and repress any passive recording of nostalgic clichés. The outcome negates the creation of an architectural metaphorical mark; buildings as symbols or icons and instead aims for the description of a new and highly contextual object/landscape, distinct from its surrounding yet indicative of an intersection of current socio-cultural and historical parameters. Spaces exist as highly integrated yet aesthetically distant; reciprocating an active looking towards history interweaving multiple pasts with a present.

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